

Assassination Chronicle

*Reclaiming History: The Assassination
of President John F. Kennedy*

By Vincent Bugliosi

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By Max Holland

What exactly happened in [Dallas on November 22, 1963](#)?

You may have thought that the debate over the Kennedy assassination was settled long ago. Vincent Bugliosi would disagree, although he'd like to settle it now. *Reclaiming History* is less a work of historical reclamation than a very, very long — and passionate — argument about what historians and investigators have claimed and counterclaimed over the years.

The argumentative design should not be surprising because, as an attorney, Mr. Bugliosi comes to the subject steeped in the adversarial process as the finest way to arrive at the truth. His fascination with the Dallas murder, in fact, began in 1986, when a British TV company asked him to be the prosecutor in a mock trial of the presumed-guilty-but-never-tried assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. Mr. Bugliosi, the Los Angeles district attorney who famously prosecuted Charles Manson and his cult, won a unanimous verdict in that case in 1971 and went on to write a book about it, the best-selling *Helter Skelter*. Now, after 20 years of intermittent effort investigating the JFK assassination, he is prosecuting this case in the court of public opinion.

It took that long partly because *Reclaiming History* is unlike any other book on the assassination ever produced by a single author. Rather than compare Mr. Bugliosi's work with, say, Gerald Posner's *Case Closed* (1993) — another effort by a lawyer to, well, close the case — it is probably much fairer to shelve *Reclaiming History* alongside the two massive federal investigations of the assassination.

The first, of course, was the Warren Commission's final report and 26 supplementary volumes, published in 1964, and the second was the final report and 12 supplementary volumes issued by the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1979. Mr. Bugliosi is a much better and more curious writer than the legal teams that produced these federal texts, and while his output might first appear modest by their standards, for a lone author writing about a lone gunman the output is staggering. (I should note that Mr. Bugliosi mentions my work in his book, mostly favorably but not always so.)

The printed text of *Reclaiming History* alone runs 1,612 pages. The book includes a CD-ROM with an additional 958 pages of end-notes before the whole prolix enterprise comes to a merciful end with a mere 170 pages of source notes. If printed like a regular book, in a normal-size font and on regulation paper, Mr. Bugliosi's work would take up 13 volumes. At \$49.95, this encyclopedic work is a bargain.

Reclaiming History, at its best, is a labor of love born out of an admirable, even relentless, ardor for the truth about the assassination. There is no other way to describe the patience and stamina required to get to the bottom of so many stories, encrusted as they are by decades of falsehoods, misrepresentations and outright hoaxes. Mr. Bugliosi's verve for setting the record straight is unequalled and will probably never be surpassed, although a book of this length, inevitably, has factual errors (e.g., the left-wing [National Guardian](#), now defunct, is called a "libertarian newsweekly"). To Mr. Bugliosi now belongs the mantle of chief defender of the official story: Oswald did it, and alone.

But there is an occupational hazard that comes with being an advocate, especially a prosecutor, rather than a historian. Mr. Bugliosi assumes a pose of omniscience that is not always warranted. He is absolutely certain even when he is not necessarily right.

The most prominent example of this is Mr. Bugliosi's treatment of the iconic Zapruder film, the most important home movie ever made. Like previous assassination researchers of every stripe, beginning with the staff of the Warren Commission, Mr. Bugliosi presumes that the "Z film" is a virtual time clock of the assassination, an unimpeachable witness that recorded all three gunshots in sequence. This is an understandable assumption, brought about because the second and third shots were so devastatingly evident. The second hit President Kennedy in the upper back, passed through him and struck Texas Governor John Connally; the third burst open the president's head. It is eminently reasonable to assume that Oswald's errant first shot, which missed everyone and everything in the motorcade, was nonetheless captured on the Z film, too.

Yet it wasn't, or at least no one has been able to find it in 43 years of looking. To make an educated guess, which is what Mr. Bugliosi ends up doing, he necessarily ignores vital testimony from several reliable ear-witnesses in Dealey Plaza. They all swore that the time interval between the first and second shots was longer than between the second and third. The only way to get to that result is to take into account the radical possibility that the first shot occurred before Abraham Zapruder started rolling. As it turns out, such a scenario fits in far better with the totality of the evidence. Oswald's pesky first shot was, in all likelihood, deflected not by an oak-tree branch, as Mr. Bugliosi would have it, but by a traffic-light mast overhanging Elm Street.

This explanation could not be more fundamental to our understanding of what happened in Dealey Plaza. It would mean that Oswald did not have six or eight seconds to fire his three shots, but [11 seconds](#), which was akin to all the time in the world. It would mean that Oswald's feat of arms was average for a former Marine and would forever put to rest any suggestion that he could not have pulled it off. That Mr. Bugliosi

did not arrive at this insight suggests that he, too, is not immune from discounting evidence that doesn't quite fit.

The “what happened” chronicle of *Reclaiming History* is written like a nonfiction novel, not all that dissimilar from the form pioneered by Truman Capote in *In Cold Blood*. For this portion, Mr. Bugliosi, understandably, relies largely on the previous federal investigations, supplemented by reliable secondary works such as Priscilla J. McMillan's book on Oswald and his wife, *Marina and Lee*, and the expert labors of a small coterie of consultants. Mr. Bugliosi's version is one of the best narrative treatments of the four days from assassination to funeral since William Manchester's Kennedy-authorized account, yet it is not novel in the sense of being new and probably draws too much from tendentious renderings by Kennedy acolytes (including Manchester). There is no evidence, for instance, that Lyndon Johnson engaged in “childish antics” during the Texas trip, as Mr. Bugliosi alleges.

The part of the book that Mr. Bugliosi calls “what did not happen” is the great bulk of *Reclaiming History* and represents his main contribution. Not coincidentally, perhaps, it also constitutes his primary justification for writing the book in the wake of Mr. Posner's widely acclaimed *Case Closed*. Unlike Mr. Posner, Mr. Bugliosi undertakes the unenviable task of rebutting every conspiracy theory known to man as of the date when he finally stopped writing.

Some might regard this as a foolish errand because there is no end to it, a fact that Mr. Bugliosi readily acknowledges. (By my count, at least four new strains have appeared in the last four months, the most recent being a supposed death-bed confession by Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt, who fingers LBJ as having been in cahoots with several of Hunt's former CIA colleagues, all of whom are conveniently dead.) To his credit, Mr. Bugliosi is not content with just piling on familiar theorists such as Mark Lane and Oliver Stone, whose claims that the CIA engineered the assassination deserve lasting scorn. He also points out how eminent authors like [Michael Beschloss](#) and Evan Thomas have contributed to conspiracy-mongering with superficially profound observations. Both have written that the U.S. government did not try very hard to unearth the truth, out of fear of where it might lead. That insinuation is a complete misreading of what happened inside the government after the assassination and a disservice to the truth, as well as to the reputations of Earl Warren and others who investigated the assassination out of a sense of duty to the country.

One of the casualties of writing a book over a 20-year period, however, seems to be the skewing of editorial judgment. Perhaps the most important canard (only because it was perpetrated by the House Select Committee) that demands a thorough, Bugliosi-style rebuttal is the so-called acoustic evidence supposedly proving that a fourth shot was fired in Dealey Plaza. Rather than being a centerpiece of the book, though, the 65-page section debunking the acoustic business is relegated to the CD-ROM (where Mr. Bugliosi deftly explains, by drawing from the best research, that the “fourth shot” is pseudo-scientific clap-trap—the putative shot occurred nearly a full minute after the assassination was over). Meanwhile, an entire print chapter is devoted to refuting the grotesque and absurd

theory that Kennedy's wounds were altered before the body arrived in Bethesda, Maryland, for the autopsy.

One cannot help admiring Mr. Bugliosi's zeal, drive, and conscientiousness. Still, the cumulative effect of putting serious issues on a par with every cockamamie assertion that has ever been uttered is, in the end, mind-numbing. In a curious, certainly unintentional way, it plays into the hands of conspiracy theorists by giving scores of them undeserved stature. Someone forgot to tell Mr. Bugliosi that less is sometimes more.